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The Poverty of Crisis Management Strategies in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: A Focus on the Amnesty Programme (Pp. 162-170)

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Abstract

The oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria has for many years been the site of environmental degradation, violence, vandalism, and chaos. The exploration and extraction of oil mineral resources is at the root of this problem. Conflicts between the region's residents and the Federal Government of Nigeria started as soon as the oil multinationals began setting up their operations. Over time, the people have had successive federal and state governments disregard their needs. Environmental degradation, pollution

from oil spills and gas flares not only destroy the people's lands and livelihood, they shorten life expectancy. These resulted in local unrest and gradually deteriorated into armed struggle, obstructing local and national socio-economic development. By 1998, the region had become a "lawless zone", where youths disrupted oil production activities, engaged in kidnapping and hostage taking, and communities frequently engaged with little provocation in destructive inter- and intra- community strife. Successive administrations have employed several strategies to resolve and manage the crisis in the region without success. The Amnesty Programme introduced in 2009 by Late President Yar'Adua is one of such strategies. This study seeks to examine the inadequacies and short-comings of the Amnesty Programme as a crisis management strategy in the Niger Delta.

Introduction

Oil mineral exploration and extraction lie at the heart of the Delta region's problem. Over 50 years of oil exploration and exploitation has occasioned environmental degradation and pollution, resulting in excruciating and brutalizing poverty, unemployment, diseases and health hazards and even death among the people living in the region (TELL Magazine, February 18, 2008). According to Azigbo (2008: 18), the major culprits in these ugly incidents are the multinational oil corporations. From one community to another, vast acres of farmlands are devastated by oil spills; aquatic lives are destroyed and the very existence of the people is threatened by the toxic effects of gas flares in addition to the cumulative effects of all disasters.

Thus, threatened by decades of operations of the multinational oil companies and abandoned by successive governments at the centre, which has resulted in high level of socio-economic underdevelopment (manifesting in the absence of infrastructural facilities and poor standards of living, the region became enveloped by a feeling of abandonment, denial and frustration.

Consequently, there has been since the 1990s, the emergence of resistant organizations from various ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta to confront the multinational oil corporations and the Nigerian state. The restiveness which started on a mild note as pockets of peaceful demonstrations to the offices of the multinational oil companies by community development committees of various host communities has since degenerated into a state of militancy, hostage-taking, destruction of oil installations, disruption of socio-economic activities and unparalleled violence, thus, turning the region into a hot spot.

The restive youths and the militants were becoming more daring and were only short of declaring full scale war on the region and the operators of the oil and gas industry when in June, 2009; late President Shehu Musa Yar'Adua unveiled his amnesty plan for militants in the region. Those willing to take part were offered presidential pardon, participation in a rehabilitation programme, and education and training in exchange for turning over their weapons. But the extent to which the Amnesty Programme, as a crises management strategy, has been effective in handling the Niger Delta crisis is debatable. This paper is part of the debate. It argues that the Amnesty Programme like other intervention measures by government has not addressed the fundamental issues that gave rise to the state of affairs in the Niger Delta region.

Structurally, the paper is divided into three main parts. Part one examines the nature and character of the Niger Delta crisis while part two is concerned with the short comings and inadequacies of the crisis management strategies adopted by government in the Niger Delta region with particular focus on the Amnesty Programme. Finally, the third part which is the conclusion makes far reaching recommendations on the way forward.

The nature and character of the Niger Delta crisis

The long years of neglect and deprivation, coupled with insensitivity of successive governments and the oil companies, had by the late 1990s created a volatile atmosphere characterized by protests, agitations and conflicts. According to Azigbo (2008:18), the restiveness which started on a mild not as pockets of peaceful demonstrations to the offices of multinational oil companies by community development committees of various host communities, soon degenerated into lock-ins and seizures of oil installations. By 1998, the Niger Delta region had become “a lawless zone, where youths disrupted oil production activities and communities frequently engaged with little provocation, in destructive inter-and intra-community strife” (NDDC, 2004).

The crises in the Niger Delta manifests in various ways namely, militancy, hostage taking and kidnapping of oil workers and frequent disruption of oil production activities through the destruction of oil and gas installations and facilities.

Prominent among the militant groups operating in the region are the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) led by Henry Okah, the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) led by Alhaji

Asari Dokubo, the Niger Delta Vigilante force (NDVF) led by Ateke Tom, the Bush Boys, the Martyrs Brigade among others. These militant groups have carried out deadly and paralyzing attacks on oil and gas facilities with their weapons. For instance, on March 16, 2003, Shell Petroleum Development Corporation (SPDC), Nigeria's biggest oil producing company, evacuated non-essential staff from its facilities in Warri, Delta State, and shut down oil production, following a month of mounting unrest by ethnic Ijaw militant groups that culminated in an attack on the Nigerian Navy on the Escravos River that left seven people dead, several soldiers wounded, and significantly disrupted riverine travel. Subsequently attacks by militants killed one Chevron contract worker and five TotalFinalElf (IFE) personnel, while gunfire badly damaged a shell helicopter seeking to evacuate employees (Cesarz, Morrison and Cooke, 2003:1). On July 12, 2006, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) combatants killed four naval personnel and injured three soldiers who were escorting a Chevron oil tanker along Chomoni creeks in the Warri South West Local Government Area of Delta State (The Punch, July 13, 2006). On the eve of the Governorship and House of Assembly elections on April 14, 2007, armed militants attacked the Mini-Okoro, Elenwo Police Stations, killing many police officers during the attack (The Midweek Telegraph, April 18 – 24, 2007). On Tuesday, January 1, 2008, the Niger Delta Vigilante Force (NDVF) led by Ateke Tom attacked two Police Stations and a five star hotel in Port Harcourt. The list of attacks is long and seemingly endless; the latest being the bomb blast on Eagle Square in Abuja on October 1, 2010 caused by MEND.

Hostage taking and kidnapping are other operational activities of militant groups in the region. A recent statistics released by Niger Delta Development Monitoring and Corporate Watch (NIDDEMCO), a non-governmental organization, shows that between 1999 and 2007, a total of 308 hostage taking incidents occurred in the region (see the Tide, Tuesday, July 10, 2007). A breakdown of this record shows that Bayelsa State was on the lead with 131 incidents. Rivers State had 113; Delta State 45, while Akwa Ibom had the least record of 15. The record further shows that in 2003, 18 oil workers were taken hostage in Bayelsa, in 2004, 5 hostages, 39 in 2006 while between January and June, 2007 69 people were taken hostage, out of which 50 were soldiers. Within the period under review, Rivers State recorded 2 incidents in 1999, one in 2005, 55 in 2006 and 60 as at June, 2007, with 26 soldiers, 1 woman and a three year-old child involved. Unfortunately, the

situation has since then deteriorated and the spate of militancy, hostage taking and kidnapping incidents have increased in scope and tempo covering virtually all the oil producing states of Nigeria.

The dexterity with which the militants operate coupled with the sophisticated nature of their weapons have defied all curbing measures and raised questions such as the source of the militants' weapons and where and how they receive the military experience and training.

Be that as it may, the issue at stake in all cases is the demand by the armed militant groups for greater autonomy and control of the oil resources in the Niger Delta region, equitable distribution of the benefits of oil mineral exploitation, justice and the development of the region though some analysts have asserted that militancy in the region has assumed some criminal dimension rather than the legitimate struggle for the emancipation of the region.

The poverty of crisis management strategies in the Niger Delta

Successive governments have over the years recognized the fact that the crisis in the Niger Delta does pose a threat to the security, unity and territorial integrity of the Nigerian state, the lives and property of the residents of the region and the booming petro-business which has direct link or bearing with the national economy. Thus, various approaches have been adopted by government to curb the crisis. Yet, the crisis remains unabated. This is because all these approaches have failed to address the fundamental issues at stake in the regions' crisis, namely, environmental degradation, consequent upon oil exploration activities, issues of fiscal federalism, minority rights, resource control and allocations.

When Isaac Adaka Boro formed his Niger Delta Volunteer Force, an armed group (consisting mainly the people of Ijaw ethnic origin) with which he declared the Niger Delta Republic on February 23, 1966, in protest for the exploitation of oil resources in the Niger Delta which benefited mainly the Federal authorities, he was routed by the federal military institution and jailed with his compatriots for treasonable felony. Boro's argument was that the people of the region deserved a better deal from the Federal authorities for the degradation of their environment and the devastation of their economy by oil multinationals.

In 1995, about thirty years after, the Federal Government under the late General Sanni Abacha struck again, this time killing Kenule Beeson Saro –

Wiwa (a renowned writer and environmental right activist) and his eight compatriots for demanding that Ogoni people be compensated adequately by Shell Petroleum Development Corporation (SPDC) for environmental devastation and economic sabotage.

On November 20, 1999, the government of President Obasanjo deployed military troops to Odi, a predominantly Ijaw town in Bayelsa State. The Nigerian military carried out an attack on a civilian village killing men, women and children. Whatever the explanations from the federal authorities for the Odi massacre, the truth is that the attack by the military was within the context of an ongoing conflict in the Niger Delta over indigenous rights to oil resources and environmental protection (Duru, 2010).

Whether in the case of Boro, Saro – Wiwa or the Odi massacre, the imprisonment and killing of the people did not in anywhere address the fundamental issues at stake in the crisis. For instance, while the people were being killed for demanding a better deal from both the oil multinationals and the federal authorities for environmental devastation, “the major culprits in the crisis”, the oil multinationals, were left by the Federal Government to continue with the devastation of the environment and the people’s means of livelihood.

Apart from this military option, government has at some other times employed a developmental approach to solving the problem. Thus, various development intervention agencies such as the Niger Delta Development Board, River Basin Development Authority, Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission and recently, the Niger Delta Development Commission set up in 2001 by the Obasanjo administration have existed at one time or the other. The aim has been to use these agencies for the development of the region. But the question remains; how does the Nigerian state and those who act on its behalf define development and underdevelopment? What to them constitutes development and underdevelopment? Understanding these issues will help in properly appraising the roles and operations of

these development intervention agencies in the region and why they have failed over the years to bail the region out of its persistent and endemic socio-economic, infrastructural and environmental crisis (Assibong, 2004).

Be that as it may, while the development intervention agencies were to ensure the socio-economic and infrastructural development of the Niger

Delta, none of them tackled the problem of environmental pollution in the area, nor did the Federal Government sanction or suspend the operators of the multinational oil corporations for their non-environmental friendly practices in the region.

It, therefore, becomes obvious that the Nigerian state and those who act on its behalf have either not acknowledged, or have deliberately and criminally refused to acknowledge that the root cause of the crisis in the Niger Delta is oil extraction, and that the excesses and insensitivity of the operators of the oil multinationals are largely contributing to the fuelling of this crisis. Thus, any development policy in the Niger Delta that fails to address wholly these issues, amounts to an excess in futility and a waste of public resources.

In June, 2009, the Late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua unveiled an Amnesty Programme for militants in the region. The central objective of the Programme is that the Federal Government will grant amnesty to any militant willing to come out of the regions' million-square-mile network of oil-laden creeks and swamps, turn in his weapon and accept a US\$13 daily stipend in exchange. It is estimated that between 10,000 to 25,000 militants surrendered their weapons at the end of the Amnesty Programme which lasted from August to October, 2009 and the payment will run for an open-ended amount of time from about US\$63 million budget by the government (New York Times, October 4, 2009). Apart from the daily payments for accepting the amnesty offer and surrendering their weapons, the militants are to undergo retraining and re-orientation programme to prepare them for full integration into the larger society.

While it must be acknowledged that the Amnesty Programme remains one of the most realistic efforts by any government in Nigeria to address and ease the unrest in the Niger Delta region, the Programme has come under criticisms for not seeking permanent solutions to the region's underlying problems. While some have criticized the Programme for doing "little to address the core causes of militancy and criminality that have plagued the Niger Delta for decades, such as lack of education, jobs and basic services" (Connors and Swartz, 2009), others question the viability of the Amnesty Programme as a crisis management strategy when the conditions and terms of the amnesty were decided by the government without consulting the militant groups (BBC News; Thursday, 6 August, 2009). In an editorial entitled; "Amnesty: Is this the end of Militancy?" the Vanguard Newspapers of Tuesday, October 13, 2009 asserts that "government has refused to address

the root cause of the militancy. Why did Isaac Boro rebel? Why was Ken Saro – Wiwa hung? Except these questions are answered and fundamental issues addressed, amnesty will be a mere ruse, an exercise in futility”. While the Amnesty Programme is in progress, the environmental and ecological devastation of the Niger Delta region by the oil multinationals remain unabated and unresolved.

As the Vanguard Newspaper had projected, one year after the Amnesty Programme, the militancy in the Niger Delta has not abated. Rather, it has escalated to other parts of the country with the militant groups sustaining and carrying out devastating attacks on strategic places in Nigeria as was witnessed in the horrors of October 1, 2010 bomb blast at the Eagle Square in Abuja by MEND.

Concluding remarks

The crisis in the Niger Delta region highlights more profound national challenges with which Nigeria will have to contend. Most notably are the issues of fiscal federalism, minority rights, resource control and allocations and poverty alleviation (Ogbonnaya, 2011).

Consequently, unless the composition of the Nigerian state is altered significantly along with vested interests, mere government policies like the Amnesty Programme cannot produce the desired result. To bring about this, the incumbent ruling class must abdicate together with their entrenched economic interests. Such an abdication would have an immediate impact on the character and form of government and also provide a new economic direction. This implicitly calls for the dissolution of the existing regime of economic ownership by a few. This leads us to an agreement with the assertion that if we cannot change the ruling class and its corresponding economic ideology in Nigeria, we better forget about the end to the crisis in the Niger Delta (Ekanem, 1997:82).

It is our submission here that one major way to ensuring this change is the proper implementation of true fiscal federalism in Nigeria. Obviously, this would guarantee a lasting solution to the militancy and crisis of underdevelopment in the Niger Delta.

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